

Address At Freedom Rally, April 10 1957

Mr. Chairman (W. E. W. Brown), distinguished platform associates, citizens of this great city, ladies and gentlemen, I need not pause to say how delighted I am to be here this evening and to be a part of this very rich fellowship. I want to express my appreciation to you for your kindness and loyalty. And I am indeed honored to share the platform with so many distinguished clergymen and civic leaders, some of whom I knew before coming here and others that I had not met before. But we all have a deep unity, a spiritual unity. I think of some of our very good friends like Dr. Nance, Dr. Brown, Dr. Huntley, who lived in Montgomery at one time and pastored one of our very fine churches there. Certainly we will remain indebted to him for his leadership and for his scholarship. His most provocative and inspiring book that has influenced minds in this nation and over the world, *As I Saw It*. I look back and see my former schoolmate from Morehouse college, Earl Nance. And so that I am not at all a stranger around here in St. Louis. And all of the other persons, I want to thank you for your personal courtesies and all the things that you have done to make our struggle in Montgomery less difficult. Certainly I owe a deep debt of gratitude to brother Thompson, whom I met some months ago. Then later in Hot Springs, Arkansas, just about two or three months ago, we had the privilege of having dinner together and talking over some very vital matters. And I am indebted to him for contacts made and for making so many vital things possible. Then I am indebted to Dr. Nance for this very gracious introduction.

It's good to be in St. Louis, for I'm happy to see the progress that has been made and that is being made in the area of human relations. In a quiet and dignified manner, integration has moved on amazingly well and this city is to be commended. Certainly the deeper cities in the Deep South have a great deal to learn from a city like St. Louis. It proves that integration can be brought into being without a lot of trouble, that it can be done smoothly and peacefully. This city is to be commended for that.

I bring you greetings from Montgomery, Alabama, a city that has been known over the years as the Cradle of the Confederacy. But I bring you special greetings from the fifty-thousand Negroes of that city who came to see a little more than a year ago that it is ultimately more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. I bring you greetings from fifty-thousand people who decided one day to substitute tired feet for tired souls and walk the streets of Montgomery until the sagging walls of segregation were finally crushed by the battering rams of surging justice. I bring you greetings from a humble people who heard the words of Jesus and decided to follow him, even if it meant going to Calvary. A people who decided that love is a basic principle of the universe.

But I didn't come here this evening to talk only about Montgomery. I want to try to grapple with a question that continually comes to me. And it is a question on the lips of men and women all over this nation. People all over are wondering about the question of progress in race relations. And they are asking, "Are we really making any progress?" I want to try to answer that question. And if I would use a subject for what I plan to say this evening, I would use a rather lengthy subject: A Realistic Look at the Question of Progress in the Area of Race Relations.

There are three basic attitudes that one can take toward the question of progress in the area of race relations. And the first attitude that can be taken is that of extreme optimism. Now the extreme optimist would argue that we have come a long, long way in the area of race relations. He would point proudly to the marvelous strides that have been made in the area of civil rights over the last few decades. From this he would conclude that the problem is just about solved, and that we can sit comfortably by the wayside and wait on the coming of the inevitable.

The second attitude that one can take toward the question of progress in the area of race relations is that of extreme pessimism. The extreme pessimist would argue that we have made only minor strides in the area

of race relations. He would argue that the rhythmic beat of the deep rumblings of discontent that we hear from the Southland today is indicative of the fact that we have created more problems than we have solved. He would say that we are retrogressing instead of progressing. He might even turn to the realms of an orthodox theology and argue that hovering over every man is the tragic taint of original sin and that at bottom human nature can not be changed. He might even turn to the realms of modern psychology and seek to show the determinative effects of habit structures and the inflexibility of certain attitudes that once become molded in one's being. From all of this he would conclude that there can be no progress in the area of race relations.

Now you will notice that the extreme optimist and the extreme pessimist have at least one thing in common: they both agree that we must sit down and do nothing in the area of race relations. The extreme optimist says do nothing because integration is inevitable. The extreme pessimist says do nothing because integration is impossible. But there is a third position that is another attitude that can be taken, and it is what I would like to call the realistic position. The realist in the area of race relations seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites while avoiding the extremes of both. So the realist would agree with the optimist that we have come a long, long way. But, he would go on to balance that by agreeing with the pessimist that we have a long, long way to go. And it is this basic theme that I would like to set forth this evening. We have come a long, long way but we have a long, long way to go.

Now let us notice first that we've come a long, long way. You will remember that it was in the year of 1619 that the Negro slaves first landed on the shores of this nation. They were brought here from the shores of Africa. Unlike the Pilgrim fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their wills. Throughout slavery the Negro was treated in a very inhuman fashion. He was a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He was merely, he was merely a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine. The famous Dred Scott decision of 1857 well illustrates the status of the Negro during slavery. For it was in this decision that the Supreme Court of the nation said, in substance, that the Negro is not a citizen of this nation. He is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner. Living under these conditions many Negroes lost faith in themselves. Many came to feel that perhaps they were less than human. So long as the Negro accepted this place assigned to him, so long as the Negro patiently accepted injustice and exploitation, a sort of racial peace was maintained.

But it was an uneasy peace. It was a negative peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to accept injustice and exploitation. For you see, true peace is not merely the absence of some negative force, but it is a presence of some positive force. I think that is what Jesus meant when one day his disciples stood before him with their glittering eyes, wanting to hear something good, and Jesus looked at them and said, in no uncertain terms, "Brethren, I come not to bring peace, but a sword." He didn't mean, "I come to bring a physical sword. He didn't mean, "I come not to bring positive peace." What Jesus is saying, "I come not to bring this old negative peace which makes for deadening passivity and stagnant complacency. And whenever I come a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new. Whenever I come, there is a lashing out between justice and injustice. Whenever I come, there is a division between the forces of light and the forces of darkness." Peace is not merely the absence of tension, but it is the presence of justice. And the peace which existed at that time was a negative, obnoxious peace devoid of any positive meaning.

But then something happened to the Negro. Moving on up in the nineteen-hundreds it became necessary for him to travel more. Circumstances made it necessary. His rural, plantation background gradually gave way to urban, industrial life. And his cultural life was gradually rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy, and even the economic life of the Negro was gradually rising. And all of these forces conjoined to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Negro masses all over began to reevaluate themselves. The Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him, he had read his Bible enough, his religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children and that all men are made in

his image. And somehow the Negro came to see that every man from a bass black to a treble white he is significant on God's keyboard. And so he could now cry out in his own soul with the eloquent poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion
cannot forfeit nature's claims
Skin may differ, but affection
Dwells in black and white the same.
Were I so tall as to reach the pole
Or to grasp the ocean at a span,
I must be measured by my soul
The mind is the standard of the man.

And with this new sense of dignity and this new self respect, a brand new Negro emerged and the tension which we witness in the Southland today can be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny and his determination to struggle, suffer, sacrifice, and even die if necessary until the walls of segregation crumble.

You see, all I'm trying to say to you is that we've come a long, long way since 1619. But not only has the Negro come a long, long way in reevaluating his own intrinsic worth, but he's come a long, long way in achieving civil rights. We must admit that. Fifty years ago or twenty-five years ago, a year hardly passed that numerous Negroes were not brutally lynched by some vicious mob. But now the day of lynching has just about passed. We've come a long, long way. Twenty-five or fifty years ago, most of the Southern states had the poll tax, which was designed to keep the Negro from becoming a registered voter. And now the poll tax has been eliminated in all but five states. We've come a long, long way. We have even come a long, long way in achieving the ballot, it's far from what it ought to be and particularly in the Deep South. We've come a long, long way there. As late as 1948, there were just seven-hundred and fifty thousand Negro registered voters in the South, and by 1952 that number had leaped to one million three-hundred thousand. We've come a long, long way. Not only that, we've come a long, long way in economic growth. The Negro wage earner today makes four times more than the Negro wage earner in 1940. Whether you know it or not the national income of the Negro is now more than fifteen billion dollars a year. That's more than all of the exports of the United States and more than the national income of Canada. We've come a long, long way.

Not only that, in our generation we have been able to see the walls of segregation gradually crumble. For awhile it looked like we would never get away from it. You will remember back in 1896, the Supreme Court of this nation established the doctrine of "separate but equal" as the law of the land. And as a result of this doctrine we were thrown and left in the Egypt of segregation. At every moment there was always some pharaoh with a hardened heart who, amid the cry of every Moses, would not allow us to get out of Egypt. There was always a Red Sea before us with it's glaring dimensions. Then one day through the providence of God and the decision of the Supreme Court, May 17, 1954, the Red Sea opened. Supreme Court said the old *Plessy* doctrine must go. (Recording interrupted) To segregate an individual on the basis of his race is to deny that individual of equal protection of the law. And so in our generation, if I may speak figuratively, we have been able to see old man segregation on his death bed. And I'm sure, and I'm sure that most of us would be very happy to see the old brother pass on because he's been a disturbing factor to the whole community.

And so we've come a long, long way since 1896. And my friends I've been talking now for about fifteen or twenty minutes and I wish I could stop here. It would be beautiful to stop here. But I've tried to tell you about how far we've come, and it would be fine if every speaker in America could stop right there. But if we stopped here we would be the victims of a dangerous optimism. If we stopped here we would be the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality. If we stopped here we would be the victims of an

optimism which makes for deadening complacency and stagnant passivity. In order to tell the truth we must move on. See, not only have we come long, long way, but truth impels us to admit that we have a long, long way to go.

It's quite true that lynchings have about ceased in the South, but other things are happening that are quite tragic. Many states have risen up in open defiance, and the legislative halls of the Deep South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification." Ku Klux Klan is marching again. And a modern version of the Ku Klux Klan has arisen in the form of so-called "respectable" White Citizens Councils. Not only that, the voice of a little boy fourteen years old is crying out from the waters of Mississippi. Men and women are being shot because they merely have a desire to stand up and vote as first class citizens. The homes of ministers and civic leaders are being bombed. More tragic than all of that, the house of God is being bombed. We got a long, long way to go, a long, long way.

Oh, I like to think about the fact that we've come a long, long way in economic development, but we have a long, long way to go. The poverty of the Negro is still appalling, in spite of all of our growth. We must face the fact that forty-three percent of the Negro families of America still make less than two thousand dollars a year. Compare that with the fact that just seventeen percent of the white families make less than two thousand dollars a year. Twenty-one percent of the Negro families still make less than a thousand dollars a year. Compare that with the fact that just seven percent of the white families make less than a thousand dollars a year. Eighty-eight percent of the Negro families of America make less than five thousand dollars a year. Compare that with the fact that sixty percent of the white families make less than five thousand dollars a year. To put it another way, just twelve percent of the Negro families of America make five thousand dollars or more a year, while forty percent of the white families of America make five thousand dollars or more a year. We've come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go in economic equality.

Then my friends, we must face the fact that segregation is still a reality in America. We still confront it in the South in it's glaring and conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the North, in the border states in it's hidden and subtle forms. Now it's true as I just said, speaking figuratively, that old man segregation is on his deathbed. But history has proven that social systems have a great last-minute breathing power and the guardians of the *status quo* are always on hand with their oxygen tents to keep the old order alive. So my friends, segregation is still a fact. But we know this evening as we assemble here that if democracy is to live segregation must die. Segregation is a tragic cancer which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. Segregation is something of a, a tragic sore that debilitates the white as well as the Negro community. Segregation is nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. The underlying philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of democracy and Christianity, and all the dialectics of the logicians can not make them lie down together. Segregation is utterly un-Christian. So we have, and so we have the Christian and moral responsibility to work courageously until segregation and discrimination have been removed from every aspect and every area of our nation's life.

Yes, we must continue to gain the ballot. One of the great needs of the hour is for the Negro to gain political power through the ballot. And I have come to see in the last few months that one of the most decisive steps that (Recording interrupted) that short walk to the voting booth. My friends, those of you here in St. Louis and those who live in states that are moving on in integration and states in the North that have already moved on have the moral responsibility to use the ballot and use it well because you don't have the problems gaining the ballot that we have in Alabama. You have no excuse. And it is your challenge to go down and get it in your hand and use it wisely. This is one of the great things that you can do for power. People in the North ask me from time to time, What can we do to help in the South? And I allow a lot of things, but I always come back to this saying, "Get the ballot and through gaining the ballot

you gain political power." And you can call the politicians and tell them that certain things will have to be done because you helped put them in office. This is an important thing.

I would like to say to you my friends, in this period we must continue to go down in our pockets and give big money for the cause of freedom. We have a long, long way to go and we are going to have to spend some money to get there. Integration is not some lavish dish that the white man will pass out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes their appetite. If we are going to get it, we are going to have to work for it, and we are going to have to give our money for it. It seems to be the strategy in the Deep South now, on the part of the White Citizens Councils and other reactionary organizations, to stall this thing as long as possible. They know as well as we know that segregation is on its deathbed, but they have decided that they are going to delay it as long as possible by keeping the Negro bogged down in court cases and litigation. And in order to destroy this stalling process, we are going to have to give big money for the cause of freedom.

And I admonish you to continue to support the NAACP. For no matter if they do outlaw it in Alabama, in Texas, and Louisiana, the fact still remains that this organization has done more to achieve the civil rights of Negroes over any other organization that I can point to. We can not afford to desert the NAACP at this hour. Let us give. Let us not waste our money on frivolities. This is time now to give big money for the cause of freedom. And we can't say that we don't have it any longer. We have it for so many other things that we want. We have the biggest cars that have ever been let loose into history. I am always appalled when I see how much whiskey and beer Negroes are drinking. And I think it would be an indictment on the integrity and practical wisdom of the Negro if historians look back and have to record that at the height of the twentieth century the Negro spent more on frivolities than he did on the eternal values of freedom and the cause of justice.

My friends, we've got to continue to persuade the federal government to use all of its powers to enforce the law of the land. (Recording interrupted) And while I am on this point, I would like to say to you that on the seventeenth of May, just a few weeks from now, we are calling upon every freedom-loving Negro, from all over the nation, who can get off of work that day to come to Washington. We are having a Pilgrimage of Prayer for Freedom to Washington. We are not going there to make any threats. We are not going there to say what you have to do. We are simply going there to thank God for what has already been done, and to ask him for his guidance through the other period of transition, and to appeal to the conscience of the nation to do something about the violence in the South and to carry through the civil rights bill that is now being argued in Congress. We are asking every minister of this nation to be there. Every congregation should send its pastor to Washington on the seventeenth of May. We have the backing of the most powerful organizations in the nation. We met in Washington just last week. The most powerful Negro leaders of this nation assembled there and all endorse this plan with hearty enthusiasm. Bishop Greene, and Bishop Walls of the AME Zion church, Bishop Greene of the AME church, Bishop Spottswood of the AME Zion church, Bishop D. Ward Nichols of the AME church, Dr. Jackson and Dr. Jernagin of the National Baptist Convention, Dr. Borders, and ministers from all over the South, Mr. Roy Wilkins, Mr. A. Philip Randolph, A. Clayton Powell, Charlie Diggs. All of the leading citizens and fighters for civil rights assembled there and endorsed this plan with hearty enthusiasm, and we intend to assemble there in Washington, on the seventeenth of May and we want to see you there. This is the time that we must register our protest in a humble, Christian, nonviolent spirit and say to the nation, say to the officials in Washington, Come over and help us. This is a time that we need you. And we need you to take a stand and to enforce the laws of the land. We've got to get it over to the nation. And there is a bit of urgency about this thing.

I'm aware of the fact that there are some people telling us to slow up. They are saying all over. There are some writing letters from the South to the North saying, A Slow up, you are going too fast. Well, I've never quite understood that. They talk about gradualism and I always felt that at least gradualism meant

starting and moving, and how in the world can you slow up when you haven't even started? The gradualism that we hear so much talk about in the South now is an escape, is an excuse rather for Adonism and escapism which ends up in A stand-stillism.(Recording interrupted)

We are not fighting for ourselves alone but we are fighting for this nation. Go back and tell those people who are telling us to slow up that there are approximately two billion four hundred million people in this world. Go back and tell them that two-thirds of these people are colored. Go back and tell them that one billion six hundred million of the people of the world are colored. Most of them live on two continents. Six hundred million in China. Four hundred million in India and Pakistan. A hundred million in Indonesia. Two hundred million in Africa. Eighty-six million in Japan. These people for years have lived under the bondage of colonialism and imperialism. One day they got tired. One day these people got tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. One day they got tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, left standing in the piercing chill of an alpine November. So as a result of their tiredness they decided to rise up and protest against colonialism and imperialism. As a result of their rising up, more than one billion three hundred million of the colored peoples of the world have broken loose from colonialism and imperialism. They have broken loose from the Egypt of colonialism. They have broken loose from the Egypt of colonialism, and now they are moving through the wilderness of adjustment toward the Promised Land of cultural integration. And as they look back you know what they are saying? Racism and colonialism must go in this world. They assembled in Bandung some months ago and that was the word that echoed from Bandung: "Racism and colonialism must go."

Just two weeks ago, in Africa and Europe, I talked with some of the major leaders of Asia and Africa. And this was the one point they stressed over and over again. Prime Minister Nkrumah and his finance minister N. K. Gbedema said to me, "Our sympathies are with the free world." There is something about America that we like but we are making it clear in the U.N. and in the other diplomatic circles around the world that beautiful words and extensive handouts can not be substitutes for the basic simple responsibility of giving freedom and justice to our colored brothers all over the United States. That is what they are saying around the world. And I say to you my friends, because of our love for America we can not slow up.

Oh, the hour is getting late. The clock of destiny is ticking out. We've got to say this to the nation that we are not fighting for ourselves alone, we are fighting for this nation. For if America doesn't wake up, she will one day arise and discover that the uncommitted peoples of the world will have given their allegiance to a false communistic ideology. I just wish this evening that somebody would take a fast plane over to Washington, and just plead with Senator Eastland and his colleagues, and say to him that the civil rights issue is not some ephemeral, evanescent domestic issue that can be kicked around by reactionary and hypocritical politicians. But it is an eternal moral issue which may well determine the destiny of our nation in it's ideological struggle with communism. The destiny of our nation is involved. We can't afford to slow up. The motor is now cranked up. We are moving up the highway of freedom toward the city of equality and we can't afford to slow up because our nation has a date with destiny. We've got to keep moving. We've got to keep moving.

I'm about through now, but that is a warning signal, a signal that must forever stand before us. I've tried to say that we've come a long, long way and we have a long, long way to go. I've tried to suggest some of the things that we must do in order to go the additional miles ahead. My friends, I can not leave you without saying that as we move on let us be sure that our methods are thoroughly moral and Christian. This is one of the basic things confronting our nation. No matter what we suffer. I know it's really hard when we think of the tragic midnight of injustice and oppression that we've had to live under so many years, but let us not become bitter. Let us never indulge in hate campaigns, for we can't solve the problem like that. Somebody must have sense in this world. And to hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. We must not use violence. Maybe sometimes we will have to be the victims of violence but never let us be the perpetrators of violence. For if we succumb to the temptation of

using violence in our struggle, unborn generations would be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness and our chief legacy to the future would be an endless rain of meaningless chaos. We must not use violence. Oh, sometimes as we struggle it will be necessary to boycott. But let us remember as we boycott that a boycott is never an end. A boycott is merely means to awaken within the oppressor the sense of shame and to let him know that we don't like how we are being treated; but the end my friends is reconciliation, the end is redemption. And our aim must never be to defeat the white man or to humiliate him. Our aim must be to win his friendship and his understanding.

Oh, no matter how much we are mistreated there is still a voice crying through the vistas of time saying, "Love your enemy." "Bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you. And then, and only then, can you matriculate into the university of eternal life. We must get a hold of this simple principle of love and let it be our guiding principle throughout our struggle.

This means that through this period we will need leaders on every hand and at every scene who will stress this. This is a time for sound and sane leadership. This is no period for rabble-rousers, whether the rabble-rouser be white or Negro. We are grappling and dealing with the most complex, one of the most weighty and complex social issues of the centuries. This problem is deeply rooted in the emotions, deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of the South. And we can't solve the problem with misguided emotionalism. This is a period for sane, sound, rational leadership. We must be calm and yet positive at the same time. We must avoid the extremes of hard-headedness and uncle-Tomism. Oh, this is a period for leaders. Leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity. Leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice. Leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause. Oh,

God give us leaders.

A time like this demands great leaders.

Leaders whom the lust of office cannot kill;

Leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy;

Leaders who possess opinions and will;

Leaders who will not lie;

Leaders who can stand before a demagogue and damn his

treacherous flatteries without winking.

Tall leaders, sun-crowned, who live above the fog

in public duty and in private thinking.

And this is the need my friends of the hour. This is the need all over the nation. In every community there is a dire need for leaders who will lead the people, who stand today amid the wilderness toward the promise land of freedom and justice. God grant that ministers, and lay leaders, and civic leaders, and businessmen, and professional people all over the nation will rise up and use the talent and the finances that God has given them, and lead the people on toward the Promised Land of freedom with rational, calm, nonviolent means. This is the great challenge of the hour.

And if we will do this my friends we will be able to speed up the coming of this new order, which is destined to come. This new world in which men will be able to live together as brothers. This new world in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. This new world in which men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Yes, this new world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. This new world in which men will learn the old principle of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. They will hear once more the voice of Jesus crying out through the generations saying, "Love everybody." This is that world. Then right here in America we will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee,

Sweet land of liberty,

Of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died,

Land of the Pilgrims pride,

From every mountain side,

Let freedom ring.

As I heard a powerful orator say not long ago that must become literally true. Freedom must ring from every mountain side. Let us go out this evening with that determination. Yes, let it ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let it ring from the prodigious hill tops of New Hampshire. Let it ring from the mighty Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. From every mountain side let freedom ring. Yes, let us go out and be determined that freedom will ring from every mole hill in Mississippi. Let it ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let it ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let it ring from every mountain and hill of Alabama. From every mountain side, let freedom ring. And when that happens we will be able to go out and sing a new song: "Free at last, free at last, great God almighty I'm free at last."